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Coming full circle

What should designers today bring to the drawing board in order to meet the demands of the new millennium?

Within the ambit of the Milan furniture fair, Italian architect Matteo Thun's work offers food for thought.

By Dorothea Sundergeld (copy) & Elias Hassos (photos)



Walking the environmental plank: Wooden Beacons reflects on the life cycle of materials and trends.

“What we need in fashion, design and architecture is more longevity. We can’t keep throwing things away as we did ten years ago.” Matteo Thun

Each year in April, everyone with an affinity for design heads for Milan and the world’s leading furniture fair. To mark this year’s staging of the event, Italian home design magazine Interni invited 25 international architect and design teams to tackle the question: What should design be in the 21st century? Turning out in force, the creative minds transformed the university building’s courtyards into oases of contemplative calm in the midst of the hustle and bustle of Milan during the trade show.

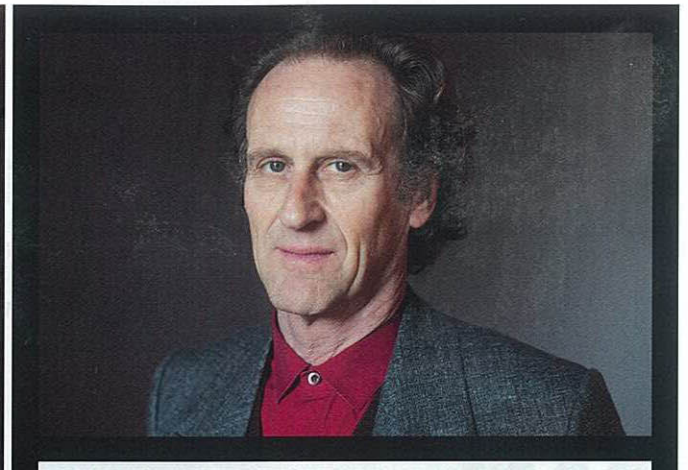
The choice of venue alone says a lot. It once housed Milan’s main hospital, the Ospedale Maggiore, which was built by Filarete, one of the 15th century’s most respected architects. In other words, it’s a shining example of sustainability. The same concept is at the heart of Matteo Thun’s installation, Wooden Beacons, which he developed together with Consuelo Castiglioni, founder of the fashion house Marni. Wooden Beacons highlights the parallels between life cycles in fashion, which are becoming shorter as well as more seasonal, and the visual lifespan of architecture, which in the era of the starchitect is also increasingly truncated. Three wood and textile sculptures were installed in Filarete’s arcades: One had paper dressmaking patterns suspended inside an oval of untreated oak; in another, a fashionista’s globe comprising buttons, glass and jewelry floats above a circle of planks; and in the third, an oak cage containing fabric bundles echoes a collection point for old clothes.

“What we need in fashion, design and architecture,” says Matteo Thun, “is more longevity. We can’t keep throwing things away as we did ten years ago.” As an architect and designer, Thun knows what he’s talking about. The built environment accounts for roughly 35 percent of energy consumption worldwide, emits half of the greenhouse gases, consumes 50 percent of our resources and is responsible for over 50 percent of the waste generated in Europe. If there is any area that needs rethinking, then construction is surely it. But what is the solution? “Wood is the resource for the 21st century,” asserts Thun. “It’s the only renewable building material. A third of the European timber industry’s output is surplus. And it’s a product with a virtually limitless life cycle.”

Matteo Thun loves wood—especially in its raw, untreated state. Instead of decaying, it simply acquires the patina of age. “Like the face of an old farmer’s wife,” muses the architect who was born in Bolzano, Italy. As a product designer, Thun used wood, for instance, in the Ofuro bathtub he designed for Rapsel which recently garnered the 2010 Wallpaper Design Award. Another example of this passion is evident in the Briccole di Venezia tables. For these, he re-used posts that had previously stood in the Venetian lagoon and were originally cut from oak trees hundreds of years old. Instead of sanding down the frilly furrowed edges of the wood, they remain, giving the piece character in the same way as lines on a weathered face. In his role as architect, Matteo Thun has made wooden structures and facades his signature. They are as much part of





Architecture after a fashion: Here, Thun provided the “hardware,” while the “software”—or soft-wear—fabrics and dressmaking patterns come from Marni designer Consuelo Castiglioni.



Matteo Thun

The 57-year-old architect and designer grew up in South Tyrol, studied under Oskar Kokoschka at the Salzburg International Summer Academy of Fine Arts and graduated from the University of Florence. On completing his studies, Thun moved with his wife to Milan where he started working with Ettore Sottsass. Thun and Sottsass subsequently founded the design group Memphis in 1981. In 1984, Thun opened his own design studio in Milan. Between 1990 and 1993, he served as Creative Director at Swatch. Matteo Thun lectured at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna until 2000 while making his name as a designer, architect and interior designer. His reputation rests chiefly on his boutique hotels such as the Side Hotel in Hamburg and the Vigilius Mountain Resort in South Tyrol. Matteo Thun also spearheaded the creation of the KlimaHotel quality seal in 2009, which is awarded to hotel concepts that meet a catalog of environmental and social responsibility standards. Thun is also an avid Audi driver.

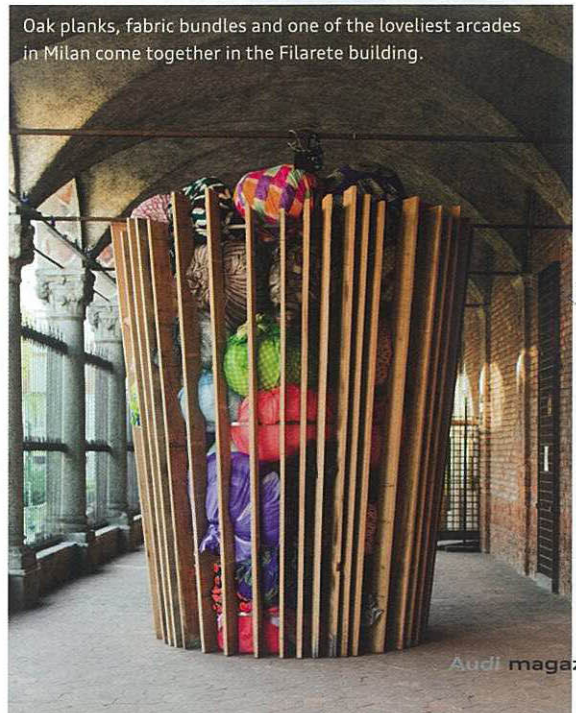
 To find out more about Matteo Thun and his work, go to www.matteothun.com.

 Matteo Thun talked to Audi tv about his installation and attitude to sustainability. To view it, go to www.audi.tv.

his award-winning Vigilius Mountain Resort as of the Boss flagship store in New York and the Schilling biomass power plant in Schwendi, Germany.

Thun’s approach to architecture involves sounding out the potential of a building site. Foremost in his mind are maximizing the energy efficiency of the structure using prefabricated components to avoid problems joining different parts—essentially the purview of a master builder. “The reign of the ‘starchitect’ is over,” surmises Thun. “Today, architects have to be life cycle managers as well. They can no longer afford to limit themselves to expressive forms alone.”

This view of architecture—dubbed “no design” or “zero design” by Thun—was inspired by his childhood in the mountains. “Anyone who grows up in the Alps faces a specific challenge,” he points out. “Poverty forces you to dispense with all the non-essentials.” From his earliest years, Matteo Thun was fascinated by the precision and >>



Oak planks, fabric bundles and one of the loveliest arcades in Milan come together in the Filarete building.



Light as a cloud: The Golden Fleece installation by Jacopo Foggini.

insight that informed everything the Alpine agriculturalists constructed, “regardless of whether it was a cowshed or a milking stool.” Nowadays, when he embarks on a new building project in the mountains, the first thing he does is to study the microclimate and spirit of the location—just as a mountain farmer would. He pitches a tent in a meadow and watches the passage of the sun from sunrise to sunset, observes wind conditions and rainfall. “Those are things you need to feel on your skin. Google Earth is no substitute.”

The return to simplicity and nature is a recurrent theme among the installations commissioned by the Interni Think Tank. UK architect John Pawson’s contribution was an austere, archetypal house with a slit in the roof to allow sunlight and rain inside, thus demonstrating how what we see as architecture—a sheltering envelope—interacts with the elements. Immediately adjacent to Wooden Beacons, Japanese architect Kengo Kuma created CCCWall, an interplay between materials and volumes. An organza “wall” divided a Filarete courtyard into two triangles. One half was paved with jagged ceramic tiles while the other featured polished round stones. When the curtain billows in the wind, it describes a yin-yang symbol in the courtyard—the Asian metaphor for harmony through opposing forces.

After the Think Tank exhibition, the life cycle of the Wooden Beacons installation is by no means at an end. The materials will be reworked into furniture and auctioned off for charity in October 2010. If this is the new broom in architecture, it certainly sweeps clean! //

Interni Think Tank

Do we really need another new chair? Could objects that require power generate their own energy? What form should tomorrow’s architecture take to stay in tune with nature? These are the questions pondered by architects and designers as part of the Interni Think Tank. The responses were displayed during the 2010 Milan furniture fair, sponsored by Audi. Cue a beautiful, thought-provoking exhibition staged at the University of Milan from April 13 to 25. Design magazine Interni invited leading lights in design and architecture such as Philippe Starck, Jaime Hayon, John Pawson, Daniel Libeskind and Matteo Thun to get to grips with the topic of sustainability and responsibility in their exhibits.

www

For more information on all aspects of the installation, go to www.internimagazine.it.



House of Stone by John Pawson is an archetypal structure.

Harmony in nature stems from balancing opposing forces. Kengo Kuma's installation CCCWall symbolizes the Asian concept of yin and yang.

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